TAKING A STEP BACK. EXERCISES AS TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES.

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ABSTRACT: *Historically, many response exercises conducted by the United States Coast Guard and other oil spill response stakeholders have been conducted as functional or full-scale exercises. With the increased demands placed on many U.S. agencies as a result of the terrorist attacks of September 11' 2001, there is a greater need than ever to ensure that time spent in training and exercises produces positive and tangible results for the participants. In preparation for the joint US/Canadian response exercise, CANUSLANT 2002, the U.S. and Canadian Coast Guards decided to take a step back and look at the lessons learned from previous exercises. Based on this review, the Joint Response Team (JRT) decided to focus CANUSLANT 2002 as a training opportunity and to work on the lessons learned that were repeatedly identified in earlier CANUSLANT exercises. Perhaps the most common exercise conducted in oil spill response is the functional "command post" exercise where exercise participants are assigned to ICS (Incident Command System) staff elements. Participants then respond to an exercise scenario and prescripted injects that are provided to drive participant actions. With personnel turnover, transfers, and increased operational demands, many exercise participants struggle through the crisis phase of an incident scenario and never have the opportunity to learn what it is they are supposed to be doing. When all is said and done, many exercise participants are often simply go home happy that the exercise is over and done with. The goal for CANUSLANT 2002 was to produce an exercise where the participants accomplished something tangible; that long pending issues would be discussed and perhaps even resolved. The Exercise Design Team hoped that the participants walked away from the exercise saying that it was time well spent and not simply thankful that the exercise was over. This paper outlines the factors that led to the success of the CANUSLANT 2002 cross border response exercise. This paper also highlights some of the fundamentals for varying your approach to exercises to achieve tangible results while providing personnel the skills and training required to respond in the event of a real disaster.*

Introduction

CANUSLANT 2002 was a joint U.S. and Canadian response exercise conducted June 25-28, 2002, in St. Andrews, New Brunswick, Canada. The exercise was hosted by the Canadian Coast Guard, Maritimes Region. 144 people participated in the exercise representing 48 U.S. and Canadian agencies and organizations. The Exercise Design Team for this exercise took a dramatically different approach for the 2002 exercise than had been taken during previous CANUSLANT exercises. During each previous CANUSLANT evolution, the exercises were conducted as functional or command post style exercises. The approach of the Design Team of using a different exercise format and focusing on lessons learned from previous exercises produced exceptional results. Ninety-eight percent of the exercise participants agreed with the statement that the exercise helped improve cooperation between members of the American and Canadian response communities an ninety-two percent of the participants felt the format of using a tabletop exercise and breakout groups allowed the time necessary for exercise participants to sufficiently discuss response issues.

Background

More than 30 years ago, Canada and the United States both recognized the need for an international marine pollution contingency plan for their adjacent contiguous waters. The first plan created for this purpose was the Joint Marine Pollution Contingency Plan for the Great Lakes, promulgated in 1974 under the Canada-United States Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement of 1972. In September 1983, four geographic annexes were added to the Joint Marine Pollution Contingency Plan, covering the Atlantic Coast, Pacific Coast, Dixon Entrance, and the Beaufort Sea.

Under the Atlantic Geographic Annex, the Coast Guards of both countries are required to conduct joint biennial exercises. These exercises are conducted to ensure overall preparedness, enhance the knowledge and skills of exercise participants, and ensure that people and resources can be effectively deployed to an environmental response incident.

CANUSLANT 2002, with this guidance is mind, was designed to improve cross-border response capabilities, promote education, and address recurring issues from previous CANUSLANT exercises. The intent of CANUSLANT 2002 was to:

- Encourage cooperation between response community members;
- Promote cross-border planning;
- Enhance the training and response capabilities of all exercise participants; and,
- Resolve outstanding issues identified in previous cross-border exercises.

Exercise format

CANUSLANT 2002 was designed as an educational exercise, using a facilitated tabletop exercise and breakout groups to address issues identified as significant lessons learned from previous CANUSLANT exercises. The CANUSLANT 2002 exercise consisted of four separate components. The opening session included an overview of the Atlantic Geographic Annex to the Joint Contingency Plan to ensure exercise participants were familiar with the plan as well as their roles and responsibilities when the CANUSLANT agreement was activated.

The second part of CANUSLANT 2002 was a tabletop exercise facilitated by Alex Wheeler from the Canadian Coast Guard, Central and Artic Region. During the tabletop, the U.S Coast Guard On-Scene Coordinator and the Canadian Coast Guard On-Scene Commander worked with federal, tribal, state, provincial, and local stakeholders as well as industry representatives to address response actions for a simulated scenario. The tabletop portion of CANUSLANT 2002 was designed to help exercise participants understand agency roles and responsibilities as well as helping to identify and manage expectations concerning response actions and capabilities.

Following the tabletop exercise, exercise participants were divided into five breakout groups for the third part of the exercise. The breakout groups included: 1) Joint Response Team Issues Group; 2) On-Scene Commander/Coordinator Issues Group; 3) Joint Environmental Section Issues Group; 4) Community Issues Group; and 5) Public Information Issues Group. Each breakout group was assigned a set of issues to work through that had been identified by the Joint Response Team and the Exercise Design Team as significant unresolved issues from previous CANUSLANT exercises.

The fourth and final part of the exercise was a plenary session. During the Plenary, each breakout group made a presentation on the issues they addressed, the content of their discussions, accomplishments, and recommendations for future action. This information was used to prepare the exercise report and help establish the Joint Response Team's strategic focus for 2003-2005.

Why conduct an exercise?

Why do organizations invest the time, money, and resources to conduct exercises? Merv Fingas in his book, The Basics of Oil Spill Cleanup, says that "to remain effective, response options in contingency plans must be tested frequently... Such exercises not only maintain and increase the skills of the response personnel, but also lead to improvements and fine tuning of the plan as weaknesses and gaps are identified." (Fingas, 2001) Exercises accomplish many things including:

- Test and evaluate plans, policies, and procedures
- Reveal planning weaknesses
- Reveal gaps in resources
- Improve inter-agency coordination and communications
- Clarify roles and responsibilities
- Improve individual performance
- Gain public recognition and support of elected officials
- Satisfy government requirements.

(FEMA Student Manual, 1995)

The Federal Emergency Management Agency states that the "focus of an exercise should always be locating and eliminating problems before an actual emergency occurs." (FEMA, 1995) These problems may be related to the training, resources, personnel, or the planning process itself. CANUSLANT 2002's unique format was designed specifically to resolve, or eliminate, problems that had been repeatedly identified in functional exercises but never acted on. Faye Campbell, the Senior Contingency Planning Officer for the Canadian Coast Guard Maritimes Region, made the statement that "unless these issues are put on the table at a gathering of people with a significant interest in resolving them, the status quo will continue." CANUSLANT 2002 sought to bring the right decision makers together and was successful in doing so.

How CANUSLANT 2002 came together

Starting off on the right foot. Planning for the CANUSLANT exercise began in October of 2001 when the lead planners for the U.S. and Canadian Coast Guards met to plan the November 2001 JRT meeting and to discuss the upcoming CANUSLANT exercise. A proposal was developed to break from the routine of holding command post or functional exercises and work on the lessons learned from earlier exercises. This concept was proposed to the JRT at a meeting in November 2001 and unanimously supported by the members of the JRT. The JRT membership prioritized the lessons learned and provided initial direction to the exercise planners.

Putting together a strong team. A fourteen-person exercise design team was put together for CANUSLANT 2002. The team included representatives from both U.S. and Canadian agencies as well as industry representatives. The team quickly bonded during the first design team meeting and worked incredibly well as a cohesive unit. Differing points of view and contrasting perspectives helped to enhance the discussion and resulted in an exceptional design process. Caution should be given to having too many people on the exercise design team. Too many people may make the process cumbersome and hinder decision-making while too few members may limit organizational input and creativity. The Exercise Design Team was responsible for all phases of the design process including: 1) design, 2) development, 3) implementation, and 4) evaluation.

Determining the right approach. Identifying the correct exercise format to use is dependent upon the exercise objectives and the knowledge and skill level of the exercise participants. CANUSLANT 2002 was designed to focus on education and problem resolution. It was not designed as a test of response capabilities or to exercise coordination of the command and control structure for a responding to a pollution incident.

Selecting a location. CANUSLANT 2002 was conducted at the Fairmont Algonquin Hotel in St. Andrews, New Brunswick, Canada. The facility provided a wonderful atmosphere for the exercise and many networking opportunities for the exercise participants. A concerted effort was made to ensure the exercise participants not only learned a lot from the exercise but they also enjoyed themselves during their stay in St. Andrews. Several favorable comments were received concerning the choice of venue and attention paid to the needs of the exercise participants. You should select your exercise location based on the objectives you hope to accomplish.

Identifying facilitators. Ninety-four percent of the exercise participants felt that the facilitators for the exercise enhanced the exercise process. Careful consideration was given to the selection of the facilitators for the tabletop exercise and the breakout groups. The Exercise Design Team prepared a facilitators handbook that outlined the roles and responsibilities of each

facilitation team. The handbook provided the facilitators with background information concerning the exercise, information on the issues that were to be discussed in each breakout group, and an understanding of the desired outcome or deliverables from each group discussion.

Evaluating and follow-up. Evaluation of exercise activities is critical to the continual improvement of emergency and crisis response capabilities. (IMO/IPIECA, 1994) The exercise evaluations submitted by the participants at the conclusion of CANUSLANT 2002 contained over 75 recommendations on how to improve cross-border pollution response coordination and the Exercise Report helped to guide the strategic planning efforts of the JRT. The Exercise Report was used to identify future priorities for cross-border planning between the U.S. and Canadian agencies responsible for protecting the waters of the Bay of Fundy and the Gulf of Maine.

Common factors that contribute to a successful exercise

Focusing on training and improving performance. Bill Campbell, the Director of Training for the New York State Emergency Management Office, used the game of baseball to illustrate the current shortfall of incident command system training in the United States. Bill said we are teaching people how the game of baseball is played and not how to play the game. The current form of ICS training teaches people a general overview of the rules of the game but where we are failing is to train people on the positions they will play during the game. We are saying here is baseball, go out and play without teaching them how to be a shortstop, outfielder, or catcher. This position specific training is key to the person's success.

This same approach is also true when we design exercises. We must be willing to design and conduct an exercise in such a way that itt allows people to learn their roles and responsibilities. Using such tools as facilitators, stoppage in play, and hot washes allows exercise participants the opportunity to ask questions and reflect upon their role and participation in the exercise. When we simply throw a bomb in the room and say respond to the scenario, we are missing an opportunity to educate the exercise participants. Exercises should reinforce training and provide an opportunity to educate exercise participants. It is much better to ensure a person understands their role and responsibilities during an exercise, than to hope they possess that knowledge when an actual incident response. Take time during an exercise to teach. Exercise participants should walk away from an exercise better prepared to respond to an incident, not just happy that the exercise is over.

Maintaining flexibility. "All Disasters are Local". This statement has been used repeatedly by the Federal Emergency Management Agency in describing the need to prepare local emergency responders for responding to the threat and possible consequences of a terrorist attack on the United States. While the impacts may be localized, for a large incident like a major oil spill, the response may be regional, national, or even international. When designing a large-scale exercise involving multiple agencies and jurisdictions, exercise planners must not lose focus of the needs of the impacted communities. In 1999, the CANUSLAK exercise conducted in Gananoque, Ontario was designed to enhance the training and use of Shoreline Cleanup Assessment Teams (SCAT) on the St. Lawrence River. The Exercise Design Team designed the exercise to meet the needs of all participants and did not attempt to take a cookie cutter exercise program and force the exercise to fit the mold. Rather, the Design Team took the exercise format and modified it to meet the needs of the exercise participants and the needs of the local communities.

Training your exercise planners. Putting together a successful exercise is not an easy task. Personnel assigned the responsibility to put together an exercise should be provided training on exercise design as well as exercise evaluation. An excellent course on exercise design is available through FEMA. Military style deliberate planning does not provide the skills necessary for designing multi-agency multi-jurisdiction exercises involving civilian government agencies, industry, and non-governmental organizations. In addition, exercise planners should be provided the opportunity to observe other exercises to gain insight on how to conduct and improve their own planning efforts.

Train as you play. Anyone who grew up playing competitive sports probably played in scrimmages to prepare for games. I recall my college soccer coach constantly telling the team to remember the basics, to practice the fundamentals so we could hone our skills. My coach used different drills and scrimmages to work on different aspects of the game. This same concept of varying your approach applies to oil spill or disaster exercises. You should use different formats for your exercises. If you have a large number of people who are not familiar with the response plan, then a tabletop exercise with an overview of the contingency plan may be appropriate. If the goal of the exercise is to ensure that people are capable of using the response equipment, perhaps a field drill is called for. By fluctuating the format for you are able to exercise various parts of the organization or test specific steps in the response process. Consistently using the same format fails to test and expand the capabilities of the exercise participants.

The report, Guide to Oil Spill Exercise Planning, prepared by the International Maritime Organization and International Petroleum Industry Environmental Conservation Association (IMO/IPIECA) is an excellent resource for personnel responsible for designing oil spill exercises. This report was "designed to guide all those in government or industry who are faced the responsibility of developing an managing oil spill response exercises." (IMO/IPIECA, 1994) One of the guiding principles identified in this report is to "not tackle complex exercises until personnel are experienced and competent." (IMO/IPIECA, 1994) This report includes a number of case studies and should be required reading for any oil spill exercise planner.

Don't forget the small stuff. Details such as a smooth registration process, sign-in sheets, and written materials help to enhance the professionalism of an exercise. The exercise staff must always be professional and organized. Flexibility is key and don't be afraid to change your exercise plan. Though behind the scenes people may be running in 20 different directions, the goal should always be to ensure the exercise participants are provided the resources and information they need to gain the most they can from the exercise.

Conclusion

We must never forget that accidents can happen at any time. Oil spill response exercises establish a strong foundation of training and expertise from which to mount a successful response operation. Here is a list of pollution incidents that occurred in the first seven months of 2002 that can be found on the Mariner Group website.

- **January 22 – Thailand.** A huge oil slick has hit beaches in Thailand's Rayong Bay, a popular holiday spot southeast of the capital Bangkok. Some 100,000 liters of oil spilled from the Panama-registered tanker *Eastern Fortitude* when it hit a rock in Rayong Bay.
- **February 8 - United States.** A ship that sank nearly 50 years ago caused a mystery oil spill that has killed more than 1,300 birds.
- **February 9 - New Zealand.** A cargo ship carrying more than 700 tonnes of fuel ran aground a few hundred meters from the north island port of Gisborne. Several tonnes of thick black oil drifted 400 meters to shore, polluting nearby rivers, beaches and coastline and sending noxious fumes over dozens of houses.
- **April 4 – Japan.** A flotilla of ships raced to contain an oil slick off Japan's western coast before it washed ashore. The 10-kilometer (6.2-mile) long spill had been slowly moving towards the coast since it bubbled to the surface from a Belize-registered cargo ship that sank four days earlier, after colliding with a fishing boat.
- **April 6 - United States.** Strong winds hampered cleanup efforts as workers tried to contain a 90,000-gallon crude oil spill off the southeast Louisiana coast.
- **June 12 – Singapore.** A collision between Thailand-registered freighter MV *Hermion* and Singapore-registered bunker tanker *Neptank VII* caused about 450 tonnes of marine fuel oil to spill into the southeastern waters of Singapore.
- **July 9 – Singapore.** An India-registered oil tanker, *Lance Naik Karam Singh PVC* (37,855 gross tons), collided with a Panama-registered bulk carrier, *Sea Epoch* (37,711 gross tons). The *Lance Naik* sustained some damage to its No.7 starboard (right) tank, resulting in about 19 tonnes of light crude oil being spilled. (Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore, 2002)
- **July 31 – Romania.** Tons of oil gushed into a river in southern Romania after torrential rains damaged a pipeline. The spill occurred in the Prahova River near the village of Manesti, some 50 kilometers north of the capital, Bucharest.

The 2002 Gulf Spill of National Significance (SONS) Exercise conducted in New Orleans, Louisiana in April 2002, used a similar also approach to exercising that was used in CANUSLANT 2002. The SONS format included a series of tabletop exercises and discussion groups that worked through various response scenarios. Rear Admiral Roy J. Casto, Commander of the Eighth Coast Guard District, encouraged "each participant to take full advantage of this opportunity to share ideas and concepts, to manage and prioritize critical resources, to identify and tackle tough issues and to find solutions that will lead to our mutual success in the event we are called upon to deal with a similar real life scenario." This should be the sentiment of all exercise design teams. Exercise design teams must ensure that participants walk away from exercises smarter and better prepared to respond to real life incidents.

In the words of Rick Rescorla, vice president for corporate security at Morgan Stanley Dean Witter & Co who lost his life in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, "Proper prior planning and preparation prevents poor performance." Rick Rescorla practiced what he preached and as a result, Morgan Stanley only lost on six of its 2,700 employees when the south tower collapsed on September 11, 2001. (Grunwald, 2001)

Biography

LCDR Joseph Gleason is Chief of the U.S Coast Guard First District's Planning and Response Branch in Boston, Massachusetts where he coordinates pollution response and contingency planning programs including the PREP and WMD Consequence Management exercises. He served as the alternate Vice-Chair for Emergency Support Function #10 – Hazardous Materials for the response to the World Trade Center terrorist attacks in September 2001. LCDR Gleason has a Masters of Public Administration degree from the City University of New York.

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